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ZOROASTRIAN SCENES ON A NEWLY DISCOVERED SOGDIAN TOMB IN XI'AN, NORTHERN CHINA *

RÉSUMÉ

Analyse de deux côtés du sarcophage de pierre du Sogdien Wirkak récemment découvert à Xi'an. Le côté sud reproduit le type déjà connu du « prêtre oiseau », qu'on propose d'identifier comme un symbole de Srōš. Le côté est montre le franchissement du pont du Chinwad, la rencontre avec le dieu Way et la Dēn, et l'arrivée à la station du Soleil.

Mots clés : Sogdien ; Xi'an ; Chinwad ; Way ; Dēn ; Srōš.

SUMMARY

Analysis of two sides of the stone sarcophagus of the Sogdian Wirkak recently discovered in Xi'an. The southern side reproduces the already known type of the "priest-bird", which the authors propose to identify as a symbol of Srōš. The eastern side shows the crossing of the Chinwad bridge, the meeting with the god Way and the Dēn, and the coming to the station of the Sun.

Keywords: Sogdian ; Xi'an ; Chinwad ; Way ; Dēn ; Srōš.

* This article summarizes two publications in Chinese by Yang Junkai («Bei Zhou Shi Jun mu shiguo dong bi fudiao tuxiang chu tan» [A preliminary study of the reliefs depicted on the eastern wall of the sarcophagus of the tomb of Lord Shi, Northern Zhou dynasty], *Yishu shi yanjiu*, 5, 2003, pp. 189-198 and pls. 1-4 at the end of the volume; «Newly discovered burials of Sogdian Community leaders in China: A preliminary decoding of the illustrations on the stone sarcophagus of the *sabao* Shi of Liangzhou dating from the northern Zhou dynasty», in Rong Xinjiang, Zhang Zhiqing (eds.), *From Samarkand to Chang'an : cultural traces of the Sogdians in China*, Beijing 2004, pp. 17-26, 59-65), supplemented by the results of a joint examination of the reliefs by the authors in April 2004 at the Xi'an Municipal Bureau of Cultural Relics and Archaeology. The western and northern sides are still in the process of study.

During the summer of 2003, one of the most spectacular discoveries concerning Central Asian communities in late 6th century Northern China was made in the outskirts of Xi'an, formerly Chang'an, capital of the Northern Zhou dynasty (AD557-581). The excavations brought to light a tomb in Chinese style, comprising an underground square chamber (3,5×3,7 m) to which access was provided by a 16,3 m long and 15° steep slope, an arched passageway and two doors. In the centre of the chamber lay a stone outer sarcophagus 246 cm long, 155 cm wide and 158 cm high. Although its shape is typical of the Chinese house-shaped sarcophagi inherited from the Han dynasty stone coffins,¹ its four walls are lavishly decorated with painted and gilded reliefs depicting scenes of banquets, hunting, travels, caravans, as well as various deities and a most interesting representation of the ascent to Heaven, all of which indicate close contact with the Central Asian and Iranian worlds.

On the lintel above the door of the southern side of the sarcophagus, two inscriptions were written, one in Sogdian² and the other in Chinese. The latter designates the tomb owner as Lord Shi, "a man of the nation of Shi, originally from the Western countries, who moved to Chang'an and was appointed *sabao* of Liangzhou". His genuine name, given in the Sogdian version, was Wirkak. He passed away at the age of 86 in the year 579, and was married to a Lady Kang, who, the inscription says, died one month after him and was buried by his side. Wirkak therefore lived during the succeeding reigns of three sinicised dynasties of Turkish origin, the Northern Wei (386-534), Western Wei (535-557) and Northern Zhou (557-581). Shi and Kang were names indicating a Central Asian origin, since these Chinese characters imply that their owner's family originated, respectively, from Kesh and from Samarkand. As an influent member of the foreign aristocracy, he was promoted *sabao* by the Northern Zhou ruler, an official Chinese title given to the administrators of foreign communities, inherited from the Sogdian *s'rtp'w* [sartpāw] meaning "caravan leader".

When comparing the scenes depicted on each of the central Asian funerary monuments discovered in China, one might notice a certain number of recurring themes³. Although variations occur in the composition of the

¹ See Wu Hung, « A case of cultural interaction: House-shaped sarcophagi of the Northern Dynasties », *Orientalism*, May 2002, pp. 34-41.

² To be published by Y. Yoshida in the Proceedings of the conference *Sogdians in China* (Beijing, 23-25 April 2004).

³ The most comprehensive study was given by B. Marshak, « La thématique sogdienne dans l'art de la Chine de la seconde moitié du VI^e siècle », *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres*, 2001, pp. 227-264. Add: Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, *Anjia tomb of Northern Zhou at Xi'an*, Beijing

pictures from one monument to another, banquets, hunts, processions and symbolic motives such as the riderless horse and the oxcart seem to have been compulsory images related to the social status of the deceased. Few motives, therefore, are unique, but among them are those related to the divine world. Not one of the deities depicted on these monuments is to be seen more than once, except for the “priest-bird” (if he is indeed a deity, see below). This tendency seems to point to the individual beliefs of each tomb owner. The religious imagery of Wirkak’s sarcophagus proves to be no exception to this rule. While the two religious scenes framing the narrative of his carrier on the western and northern sides betray a rather eclectic attitude, the southern and eastern sides, to which the present article is specifically devoted, are focussed on Zoroastrian themes, including a depiction of the ascent to Heaven which is so far unique.

DESCRIPTION

Unlike the subjects depicted on the other sides, which although closely connected display separate scenes, the southern and eastern sides are each to be seen as a whole.

The southern side (220 cm wide, 110 cm high) includes the stone door of the sarcophagus in its middle, flanked by two guardian gods each trampling over a demon. The horizontal beam bearing the epitaph rests upon the door and extends beyond it on both sides. The door is flanked on either side by a false mullion window. Above each window four musicians are playing, with two attendants. Under each window the field is occupied by the figure of the “priest-bird” (Fig. 1); this image (always in pairs) recurs on Sogdian tombs from Northern China, but appears also at Bamiyan on the Mithra image painted above the 38-meter Buddha, and on ossuaries from Samarkand.⁴ On the panel discussed here the “priestly” part of the figure has a long beard, a mouth-cover (*padām*), a cap decorated with a diadem to which long fillets are attached and decorative elements derived from a Sasanian crown type (crescent and merlon). The left hand is passed in the tied soft belt in order to hold the libation spoon, which, however, is missing (it is depicted in most other instances). Each figure is standing in front of a fire altar of the canonical Sasanian type with the three-stepped

2003 [in Chinese]; C. Delacour, P. Riboud, *Lit de pierre, sommeil barbare*, Musée Guimet, Paris 2004.

⁴ F. Grenet, «Mithra, dieu iranien: nouvelles données», *Topoi* 11, 2001 [2003], pp. 40-41, figs. 9-10.

base,⁵ directing the sacred twigs (*barsoms*) down towards a tray filled with various shaped vases.



Fig. 1: The "priest-bird" on the bottom left of the southern side (©Photo: Yang J.)

The eastern side (Fig. 3) consists into two rectangular 110 cm high, 8,5 cm thick, and respectively 57,5 and 62,5 cm wide stone slabs joined together. They depict one scene divided into an upper and a lower register, each of which must be read from right to left. In addition, two vertical posts featuring the wooden structure of the building which is clearly detailed on the upper border of each side, beneath the roof, split the scene into three.

The lower register begins at the entrance of a long bridge guarded by two dogs emerging from behind rocks. Two characters wearing long tunics with narrow sleeves, a mouth-cover, a small bag attached to their belt, and

⁵ The only comparable image for the viewpoint of the correctness of the representation of the altar is on a funerary bed base published by M.L. Carter, «Notes on two Chinese stone funerary bed bases with Zoroastrian Symbolism», in Ph. Huyse (ed.), *Iran: questions et connaissances, Actes du IVe Congrès européen des études iraniennes, Paris, 6-10 septembre 1999* [Studia Iranica. Cahier 25], Paris 2002, [p. 263-287], notamment p. 268-271 et figs. 8-9.

a hat, stand in front. They hold a bundle of sticks (rendered as a twofold line). Their outfits designate them as priests holding the *barsoms*. They close the entrance to the bridge, after the last members of a long procession have started to cross it. Among the crowd crossing the bridge one can notice four human figures (a couple and two children) who have almost reached the other side. Behind them follow all sorts of animals walking past two flaming balls: a couple of horses, a donkey, a cow, sheep, two camels, one bird, plus several smaller animals which are difficult to identify. The bridge crosses over tormented waters, from which emerge the heads of two horrid creatures (Fig. 2). The lower structure of the bridge itself is supported by posts with monster headed capitals. On the far left of the scene, the bridge reaches a rocky shore, over which fly a legion of winged creatures that are intricately mingled with those of the upper register.



Fig. 2: Sogdian tomb, Xi'an, eastern side: crossing of the Chinwad bridge (Wirkak and his wife are at the extreme left) [©Photo: Yang J.]

The upper part of the scene, as already mentioned earlier, must also be read from right to left. Under the figure of a two-armed god holding a trident in his right hand, seated cross-legged above three bulls and inscribed

in a halo flanked by two attendants holding a windy scarf, a couple is sitting together, facing three crowned figures. The woman wears a Chinese type garment, and holds a cup in her right hand, whereas the man, wearing western clothes and a hat, holds a tray or a cylindrical object. A crowned figure stands in front of the couple. She is winged, barefooted, and is dressed in a long Indian-style tunic: a long piece of material is wrapped around her hips, tied in a long knot, and thrown over her left shoulder. Beneath the tunic, she wears a long-sleeved shirt. It is difficult to see what gesture she is making with her left hand. Behind her, to the left, two similarly crowned creatures holding a cup and a flower, apparently dressed in a western-style round-neck tunic, emerge behind a mountain range. These mountains form a natural boundary between the upper and the lower register.

Continuing in the upper section to the left, before meeting an assembly of winged deities and creatures flying in the midst of a flowery heaven, one comes upon a character with no wings, his hair into a chignon. He is dressed in an Indian-style tunic, and, judging from his attitude, is apparently falling from the sky. Above him, a winged creature wearing a crown watches him tumble. These two creatures are followed by four winged horses: two of them flying to the right, the others heading left. All except for the one on the upper right wear a crescent moon on top of their head. Those on the left are mounted by a couple, obviously the tomb owners, wearing a crown with ribbons. The group is preceded to the far left by heavenly musicians playing their instruments, and an escort of hybrid creatures with elaborate tails: a lion (?), an ox, a camel and a ram. These animals are dashing on the rocky shore mentioned earlier, creating a natural junction between the lower and the upper register. Below them, ducks are swimming in the water.

COMMENTARY

It is probably not by chance that the specific Zoroastrian scenes are on the southern and eastern sides, as they correspond, respectively, to the direction the priest faces when officiating and to the direction of Paradise.

The “priest-bird” depicted twice on the southern, facade side, has been recently identified, tentatively, by one of the authors of the present article as the Zoroastrian deity Dahmān Āfrin who embodies the ubiquitous effect of pious deeds.⁶ But since then, Oktor Skjaervø in a private communication has drawn our attention to the Avestan passage *Vidēvdād* 18.14 in which it is stated that the cock, the animal associated with Srōš, is himself this god’s *sraošāvarəz*-, i.e. the eighth priest of the original Yasna liturgy.

⁶ F. Grenet, *loc. cit.*

On several images of the “priest-bird”, in particular the one under discussion, the bird’s tail and legs looks very much like those of a cock. It seems therefore that Skjaervø’s proposal to recognize this image as a hypostasis of Srōš, has much in its favour.⁷ The tray towards which the “priest-bird” directs the barsoms is typical of the “outer” rituals, which contrary to the “inner” ones (Yasna, Vendidad) have not necessarily to be solemnised in consecrated places. The service implied here is most probably the *čahar-rom*, solemnized on the “fourth” morning after death, at the time when the soul is supposed to cross the Chinwad bridge. The presence of a symbol associated with Srōš is all the more justified as this god helps the soul crossing the bridge and is one of its judges.

Most details of this scene on the eastern side can be directly interpreted from the Zoroastrian texts describing the journey of the soul after death, the most straightforward parallels being found in the ninth-century Pahlavi treatises *Greater Bundahišn* (G.Bd., chapter 30) and *Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram* (WZ, chapter 30).

The bridge which occupies two thirds of the lower register is the Chinwad bridge crossing over the pit of Hell, the latter being symbolized by monstrous heads emerging from the swirls or carrying the posts. Two details are particularly relevant for the identification of the bridge: the two dogs which can be seen from behind the rocks above the entrance are mentioned in connection with the Daēna (*Vidēvdād* 19.30), but also without her, as guardians of the bridge (*id.* 13.9: *spāna*, “the two dogs”, nominative dual); the flames burning in two places over the initial section of the bridge are those which help the soul crossing in the darkness (G.Bd. 30.23: “The Farrbay Fire, the victorious, strikes the darkness, in fire shape he leads the soul over the ridge”; WZ 30.52: “The fire form leads across the Chinwad bridge ... and then there stands the likeness of a mountain over which the soul ascends” — in the image under discussion the bridge is set in front of rocks⁸).

⁷ Two anthropomorphic images of Srōš have been identified in Sogdian art: one on an ossuary in the Tashkent Historical Museum showing the judgement of the soul at the Chinwad bridge (L.I. Rempel’ in G.A. Pugačenkova (ed.), *Iz istorii velikogo goroda*, Taškent 1972, p. 48, fig. 1 ; P. Chuvín (ed.), *Les arts de l’Asie centrale*, Paris 1999, p. 166, fig. 226); one on a painting from Panjikent (E. de la Vaissière, P. Riboud et F. Grenet, « Les livres des Sogdiens », *Studia Iranica* 32, 2003, pp. 127-136, figs. 1-2). But these icons postdate the “priest-bird” type, which seems to have gone out of fashion after the 6th c.

⁸ Probably a reflection of *Vidēvdāt* 19.30 : “[The Maiden] leads the souls of the just over the Chinwad bridge, to the embankment (*haētū-*) of the spiritual *yazatas*”.

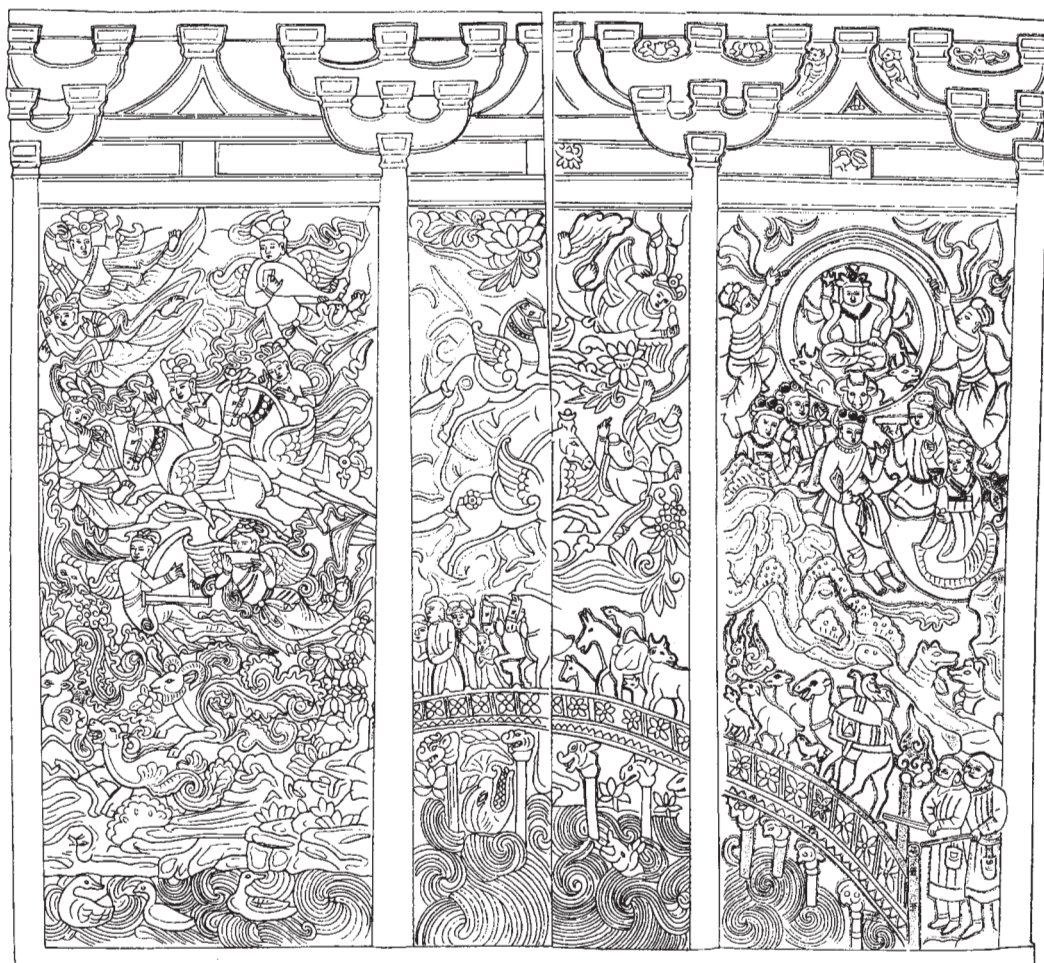


Fig. 3: Sogdian tomb, Xi'an: drawing of the eastern side (©Drawing: Yang J.)

Some other details of the lower register are not directly described in the texts but appear at least consistent with their contents. The two Zoroastrian priests (obviously the *zōt* and his assistant the *rāspīg*) stand before the entrance of the bridge but are not walking on it; they appear to have solemnized the *čaharōm* ceremony and, so to speak, “dispatched” the souls towards the bridge. The deceased Wirkak and his wife have just crossed above the head of the larger monster with its mouth turned upward, which shows that they have victoriously passed the test of the bridge and are no longer under the threat of falling into Hell. They are followed by a selection of animal species, all of which belong to the *gōspand* (“beneficent”) categories, like those shown in the left-hand third of the register (except for the lion, in principle an Ahrimanic creature). This echoes a statement in WZ 30.57 concerning the creatures of Paradise: “The form of the beneficent animal will turn to many kinds of the five classes: on land the quadrupeds, in the water the fishes, in the air the bird form which will rejoice the soul by their pleasant voice”. The fact that one of the camels crossing the bridge is laden with wares probably reflects the particular concerns of a Sogdian merchant on his deathbed. The small boy and the small girl who walk next to the deceased couple are more difficult to identify. Although the soul is once figured as a naked child on a Sogdian ossuary,⁹ they can hardly represent the souls walking next to the bodies, as in all Zoroastrian texts the soul alone crosses the bridge. Perhaps they are children who died before their parents (but a long time before, as Wirkak died aged 86)? Alternately, they could be young servants (WZ 30.61 mentions *paristišngar* “maid-servants” in Paradise).

The right-hand third of the upper register shows the next stage in the ascent to Heaven. The scene is presided over by a god whose iconographic features (bulls, trident) are those of Śiva Maheśvara, but with two unusual variations: the god has one head instead of three, and a billowing scarf is held over his halo by two flying attendants. In Sogdiana the iconographic type of Śiva Maheśvara or Śiva Mahādeva was transferred to the Iranian god Vayu (Mid. Pers. Way, Sogd. Wešparkar “Vayu who acts in the superior region”); in one of the images which has come down to us a horn was

⁹ The Sivaz ossuary (Kesh region): N.I. Krašeninnikova and F. Grenet, in F. Grenet (ed.), « Trois nouveaux documents d'iconographie religieuse sogdienne », *Studia Iranica* 22, 1993, pp. 53-54, 60-65, pl. IV. The nudity of the soul, tentatively attributed to Buddhist or Christian influence in this article, in fact finds its direct explanation in the Pahlavi version of the *Širōzag* (Sr.1, § 2) in which it is stated that Wahman dresses up the soul on its arrival to Paradise. This god is indeed depicted in front of the naked child, holding a piece of cloth and exhibiting exactly the same attributes as he does in the series of the Amahraspands on the ossuaries from Miankal: short beard, libation spoon, blessing gesture.

added, blown by one of the three heads, in order to mark Wešparkar's specific function as an atmospheric god.¹⁰ The same concern explains the addition of the scarf (a symbol of the blowing wind) in the present scene. According to *G.Bd.* 30.23 the "Good Way" plays a decisive role just after the crossing of the bridge: "On the summit of Mount Harborz the Good Way takes [the soul] by his hand, he brings it to his own place (*i.e. the atmosphere*), and as he has received this soul he hands it over". The non-canonical reduction of the heads from three to one is perhaps intended to show that this Way is in fact the "Good" one, while the usual three-headed type, with one head demoniac and one female, expresses the fundamental ambivalence of the god. At the same time, the absence here of a depiction of the expected Ohrmazd as supreme master of Paradise (a function which the only Sogdian Zoroastrian text which has survived¹¹ recognizes to his Sogdian "translation" Adhvagh, "Supreme God", sometimes identified with Indra) certainly overemphasizes the importance of Vayu-Wešparkar. The latter's promotion in the celestial hierarchy seems confirmed by a Chinese account on Sogdian temples in Chang'an: "The Heaven deity of the *Hu* of the Western Countries is the one which Buddhist texts name Moxi-shouluo (Maheśvara)".¹²

In Pahlavi texts the theme of the encounter with the atmospheric Way sometimes overlaps with that of the Dēn (*Daēnā*) coming in a scented breeze. In the present case it appears that the Dēn is depicted just under Way, as a winged lady with her right hand passed in the *kustīg* which is by itself a symbol of the Zoroastrian faith. Her left hand makes a welcoming gesture, or perhaps instead she is collecting a roll handed over by Wirkak (the record of his good actions?).¹³ She is followed by two other maidens, without wings, whose function seems to take charge of the attributes attributed to the Dēn by a Sogdian description transmitted in a Manichean

¹⁰ B. Marshak, « Les fouilles de Pendjikent », *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres*, 1990, pp. 307-308, fig. 16. For an overview of the iconography of Wešparkar see Zhang Guangda, « Iranian religious evidence in Turfan Chinese texts », *China Archaeology and Art Digest*, 4:1, 2000, pp. 193-206.

¹¹ This text is preserved in two fragments which were initially considered Manichean: BL 4 (N. Sims-Williams, « The Sogdian fragments of the British Library », *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 18, 1976, pp. 46-48 and p. 82 n. 116) and an unnumbered fragment from the Otani collection (Y. Yoshida, « On the Sogdian infinitives », *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 18, 1979, p. 187).

¹² Wei Shu, *Liangjīng xīnji*, j.3, Buzheng quarter.

¹³ In *Dādestān ī dēnīg* 23.5 the Dēn is qualified as *nigāhbed [ud] ganjwar ī kirbag* "guardian and treasurer of good deeds", but she, not the soul she encounters, carries the "store of [its] own good deeds [on her] shoulder". The only alternative for the object hold by Wirkak would be a tray, the meaning of which would not be straightforward.

text:¹⁴ a cup (presented by the maiden to the left) and flowers (the maiden in the middle has a flower pinched between her thumb and forefinger). Wirkak and his wife are each kneeling on a round carpet which appears to symbolize the *gāh* “place, seat” allotted to each Paradise dweller.¹⁵

The middle and left thirds of the upper register are filled with celestial musicians who express the very name of the Zoroastrian Paradise, *garō-nmāna*- “the house of the welcoming song” (the same theme is shown in the upper part of the southern side, above the cult scene, but there the musicians have a more common appearance). They revolve around four winged horses, three of which have an astral symbol on their head. Two are mounted by the deceased couple, and altogether the horses are parted as in Mithra’s quadriga (cf. the images at Bamiyan, Kirish-Simsin near Kucha, cave 285 at Dunhuang).¹⁶ The notion here expressed is clearly that of the “station of the Sun”, the highest one according to *G.Bd.* 30.26 (“the station of the Sun which is the radiant Paradise”).

In the central panel, the character which appears to fall from Heaven is the only one in the whole scene who has no crown, but a bare chignon. To Judith Lerner, who examined the reliefs together with us, we owe the attractive suggestion that this detail singles him out as a Buddhist or a Taoist.

One depiction of the crossing of the Chinwad bridge and one of the ascent of the soul to Heaven were already known on ossuaries from Sogdiana,¹⁷ but none presents such a richness of detail. The precise parallels which can be found in the Zoroastrian literature strongly suggests that the artists, or at least the person who commissioned their work, were not only followers of the Zoroastrian rituals but were also well acquainted with the texts, probably through contact with priests.

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¹⁴ C. Reck, « Die Beschreibung der Daēnā in einem soghdischen manichäischen Text », in C.G. Cereti, M. Maggi and E. Provasi (ed.), *Religious themes and texts of pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia*, Wiesbaden 2003, pp. 323-338, pl. 6-8.

¹⁵ Cf. the rectangular carpet under the flying soul on the Sivaz ossuary (Krašeninikova, Grenet, *loc. cit.*, p. 62).

¹⁶ Grenet, « Mithra, dieu iranien », figs. 9, 11, 12.

¹⁷ The ossuary in the Tashkent Historical Museum (references above, fn. 7) and the one from Sivaz (reference fn. 9).

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